

Animating an Indian Story Ramanlal Mistry

PRAKASH MOORTHY



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RAMANLAL MISTRY



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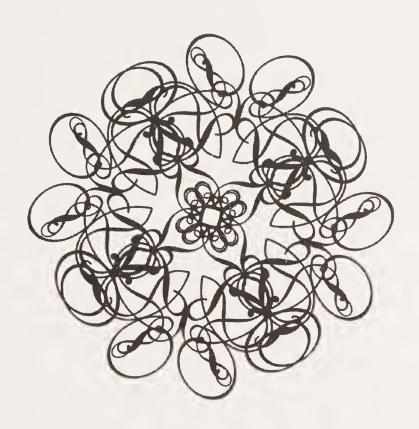
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National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad



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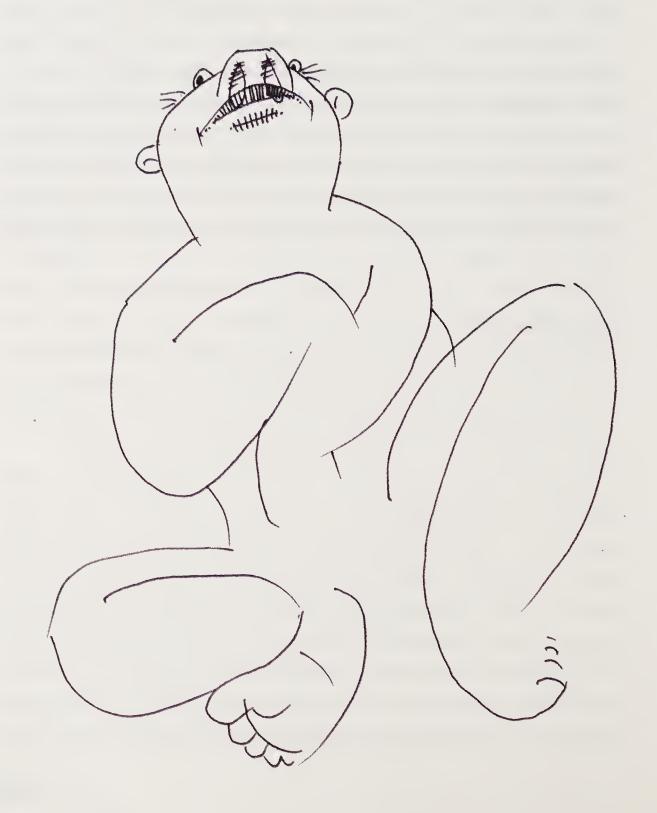
In 1986, on a very difficult morning of our first semester, my classmates, Shouma Banerjee, Basava Raja and I landed up for class at quarter to ten. We were forty-five minutes late for the class, Introduction to the Oxberry Rostrum Camera. The gentle looking teacher was walking towards us with a smile, when the door flung open and Binita Desai, our coordinator stormed in and gave us a sharp piece of her mind. For being late and for having made R L Mistry wait. This was our first meeting with R L Mistry and we were all struck by his calm composure that contrasted to the endless onslaught that then doubled with Nina Sabnani joining in. Then I S Mathur came and told us what he thought of us. What sank in more than the entire tirade in C major was the deep respect they all had for this meek looking man.

This is a visual biography of Raman Lal Mistry as artist, animation filmmaker and teacher. The story enters his life, as from within another, the stories of his village, stories that his mother told him, stories that he was part of, stories in the films he saw and the stories that he puts into films. Tracing his rural upbringing, the schooling at Baroda, the learning at NID, we find him becoming one of the real teachers of animation in the country. Unruffled by today's radical shifts in animation technologies, he wants tales to be told entrenched in the idiom that we belong to, that of contemporary Indian reality. He says that the more local the

content is, the greater it is as universal art. The more we study our own reality, the more is the universality in the message we make.

For an individual rooted in the rural, the film that fetched him the National Award in 1985 was "National Highway". It is made up of stark modern images strung together from a contemporary India. The Award was the recognition and acceptance by our country of this new form of expression in animation cinema. At a time when original content is either sidelined or brutally westernised for the sake of selling at the global market, Raman Lal Mistry hugs the process of layout which according to him is the *mise'en scène'* that we must possess ourselves, to construct our images. Through his stories he tells us to walkabout and learn from our landscapes. That layout is the walkabout without which we will have nothing much to say.

Prakash Moorthy





RL Mistry is a teacher par excellence in and out. Almost shy of asserting himself, letting the young designers blossom has been probably his motto. RL Mistry is held in high respect in India and abroad for his highly superior animation skills and ability to be 'glocal' in thinking and perception.

In NID's foray into animation in the mid 80s, R L Mistry had played a significant role. The fact that an alumnus has come forward to pay his tribute by giving his personal time to create this visual biography says a great deal about Shri Mistry's success as an empathic and inspiring teacher. It is probably the best tribute one can get in one's lifetime. Shri Mistry has earned it and we all join in celebrating his times and works through the years.

Dr Darlie O Koshy

Executive Director, NID

There has been a great deal of talk lately about Indian Animation - its present status, its future prospects: "the next big thing after BPO's and call centres"..... "a burgeoning industry that will create thousands of jobs for our skilled animators"....." the players will rake in millions of dollars annually - no, make that billions - from jobs outsourced globally"..... The voices you hear are those of media magnates, venture capitalists, facilitators who have networked with studios around the world. Amidst all this hype and thunderous self-congratulatory backslapping, one can barely sense, if one tried hard enough, the presence of a muted voice of silent rebuke, veiled behind a gentle smile. RL (as I have known him for

over three decades) is a man of very few words, but what he has to say comes through with great clarity and conviction in his beautifully crafted films and, of late, more and more through the rich and varied works of his students from NID whom he has mentored and guided over the years: short films that bear the earthy fragrance of the soil they grew out of - stories that celebrate heroes of whom the balladeers sing, anecdotes and gossip from the bazaar, fables, myths and folklore. It is not easy to delve into the depths of his self-imposed silences, to discover what makes RL tick in quiet articulation. Prakash Moorthy has come up with some delightful insights into the mystery that is RL.

Ram Mohan

Director, Computer Graphiti Animation Film Maker, Mumbai

This is the testimony from an Indian Animator recalling the history and the stories he was told by his parents, from a dedicated student to his exemplary master and from a man to his country's heritage. The demanding exigency of narration seeks old reminiscence from childhood with the freshness of emotion; it also gives space to imagination and inspires a sense of growth with very alive and moving writing to reach the essential in a few strokes. Moorthy is such a good animator that he also becomes a good writer with images bursting from between the lines, with quality of detail served by a wonderful sense of observation and humour; it flows in villages and in history, and at times it holds the emotion in a frozen image, vivid and clear, Gandhiji for instance.....

Moorthy's unquenchable sincerity makes him find the exactitude of tone, like a musical performer, the *srutis* echo from chapter one to three, and history of India, and the story of his teacher are both rooted within his Indian soul. The restitution of the humble-

ness of people, their daily fight, their national fight, their internal fights as well as their dreams become universal. It is also a journey in the land of cinema, from its first steps and babbling to its radiant masterpieces of its Indianness. Animating also means giving life and the French anagram of *animer* both holds the word *aimer*, to love, and *ame*, the soul.

Martine Armand

Curator, Cinema Paris, December 2004

There are teachers who students have heard of even before they have seen them. Their reputation precedes them and every student wants to be guided by them. Then there are teachers who are so invisible that the student realises in retrospective how much s/he has learnt from them. R L Mistry is one of these teachers. He has the gentleness to allow students to find their own voice. He provides the space and the human warmth that students feel all the discoveries are their own. As a student and later as a colleague I had the good fortune to work with R L Mistry and I was always touched by his generosity and humility. He is a man of few words and a wry humour, who always amazed us with his precise analogies and expression. I realised my learning from him much later. His work spoke volumes, about his rich artistic abilities and his love for the fantastic.

In his inimitable style of storytelling and his very special humour, Prakash Moorthy brings to our attention the context in which such a teacher evolved and helps us understand this against the historical background of animation in India.

Nina Sabnani

Activity Vice Chairperson, Education NID

At the beginning of my student days at NID, animation was just another cute cartoon film. But 'National Highway' changed it all. I was mesmerised, mystified, spellbound and what not! Slowly the drug of animation got into me and one of the pushers was the humble, quite and low profile ever smiling man - our good old R L.

During my student days I slowly discovered and was inspired by his unique style of working, relentless sketching and scribbling in his sketchpads. He was always there for me as a great teacher, motivator and above all a humanist. After passing out from NID, while working in the frenzied industry situation, encountering the so called aimless and fuzzy animation jobs, at times I used to tell myself that we need more of RLs to establish a genuine Indian Animation Industry in the world animation map. We need to document the works of such unsung heroes like RL, gather all the scribbles, drawings and sketches of the amazing explosive imaginations and ideas...thus paying a tribute to the great minds in animation, long overdue and also offering the students an opportunity in future to dig into the rich legacy to rediscover the roots of Indian Animation. This book offers an ideal beginning towards this effort.

Sekhar MukherjeeCoordinator, Animation Film Design
NID

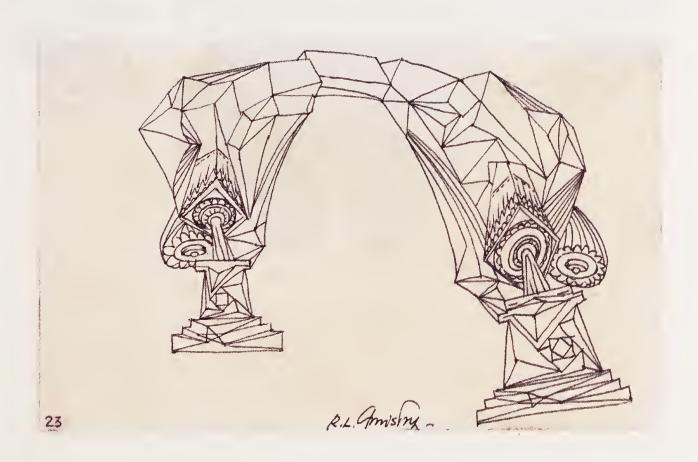
Prakash Moorthy could not have given a better gift to R.L. Mistry for his lifelong contribution to Animation Design Education in India. Both are well known animation designers and educators today. R.L. Mistry's story is unique yet represents thousands of unknown, talented, skilled and extraordinary people living in the towns and villages all over. The book lucidly illustrates what goes into the making of a contemporary Indian designer-educator, which is well beyond the formal training and project experiences at educational institutions.

In a way Prakash Moorthy's book has provided some clues to the question why a person with outstanding professional skills and deep understanding of self and society would not showcase his eminence. It is like a multifaceted mirror showing many portraits drawn together depicting priceless innocence, rough and tough situations, challenges, and interesting work/experiences of R L Mistry.

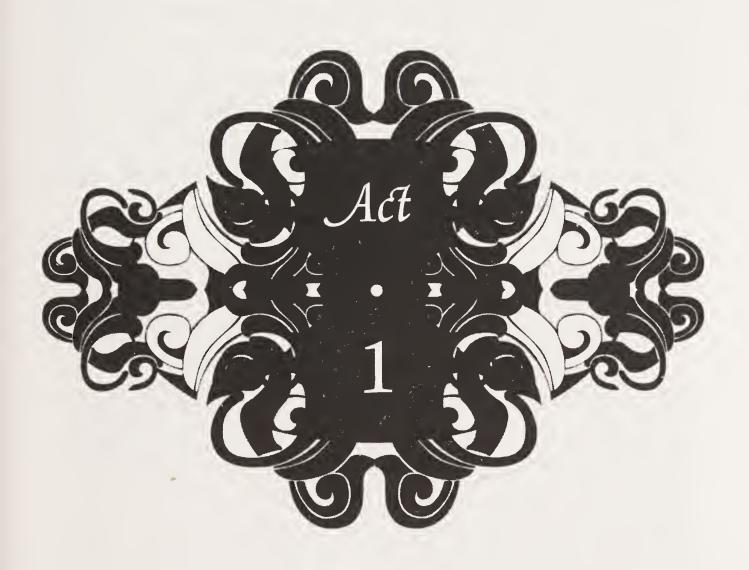
I feel the best of R L Mistry is yet to come.

Sudarshan Khanna

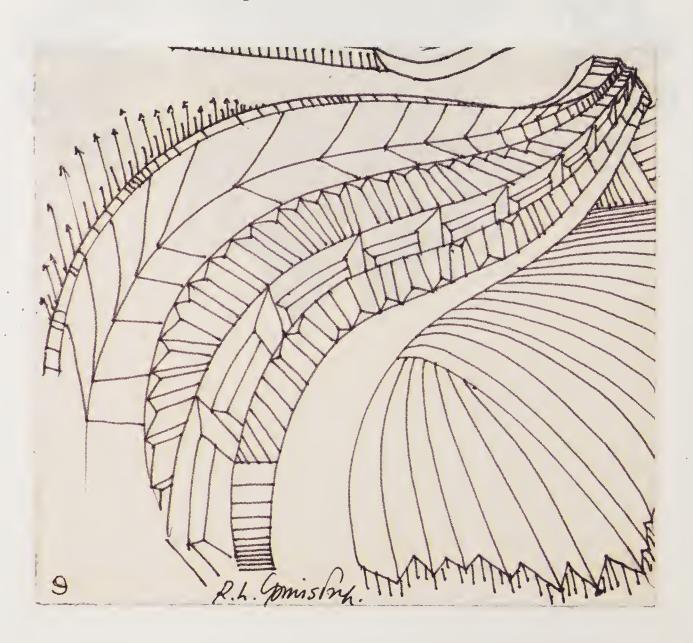
Activity Chairperson, Research & Publications NID



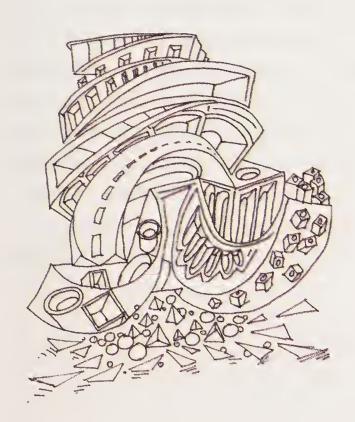




ashiben went to see the first train at Timberwah in 1908 with her elder brother. She was eight years old and her brother was twelve. Timberwah is a single cabin railway station on the rail to Bardoli. The land is barren and has the tall grass of the Indian plains, growing wild. In Bengal another boy and his sister went to see a train, but that was in a movie. The train chugged across the plain, spewing smoke and steam at a black and white blue sky. The grass swayed in its passing and Kashiben told her grandchildren later that the train was bigger and louder than she expected.



Her brother took her to Surat where she saw Roshni of the Streets. She also switched on and off a small electric bulb at a fair. Two years later she married Lallubhai Dhanjibhai Mistry. She stayed with her parents for a few more years till Lallubhai bought a house and set

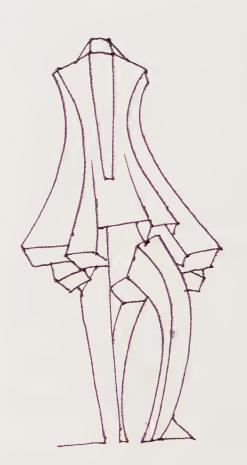


He never believed Kashiben's story of the electric bulb until years later when he saw one for himself - a noisy steam generator installed in Vyara by an unsung mad Patel given to generation of electricity as private enterprise. The machine would start at 6 pm and stop at 8 pm every evening, to light up dull yellow flickering street bulbs. People of Vyara liked to walk about in this two hour sepia tone to

show off their new clothes. They perfected a special sign language to communicate during this steam run madness as even the loudest of them drowned like stone beneath its rumble. This monster was the biggest noise in their growing years to all of Lallubhai's children. Ramanlal remembers its hoarse rhythm to this day. He was the seventh child born to Kashiben and Lallubhai.

Lallubhai was not from Vyara. His father died when he was a child. His mother worked as an agricultural labourer to bring up the children. Lallu managed to finish his primary education before he left home, barely ten, to work as a carpenter's help. He learned many skills by sheer hard work and became a busy carpenter of the village and would soon be a Government contractor of job works.

People of Vyara have always been good farmers. They grew rice and groundnut, cotton and jowar. Life moved around the monsoons, farms and their wells that dried. Then a man appeared, changing everything in their lives. He walked about with a long staff and had large ears sticking out like cabbage from under his turban. He walked about with the *bhangis* who carried the village excreta on their heads. He walked about everywhere. Her uncles and neighbours walked about with him. When he was far away in other districts,



Kashiben would still see his reflection in the well and she knew that everyone in her village also saw Bapu like that. As a reflection in their precious water, even when he was miles away, walking about with the bhangis. "Apdo bapu kuva ma".

When Bapu fell the people here wept the loudest. The impact he left in Vyara reflected through generations. Through Kashiben, it seeped into her children. And through Ramanlal's work it subtly swept over his students. Some took it as old-fashioned sensibilities and others saw our truth in them. And it manifested in their young work,

sometimes unknowingly. Had Bapu not fallen to fanatic bullets he would have walked about our country more, teaching us that moving

across our land was the way to understand our people and traditions. To respect and comprehend the spectrum of our varied heritage was also to study and experience the layout of our land. To construct our *mise en scène* we must study our layouts. Ramanlal tells us that 'layout' is the very soul of animation cinema.

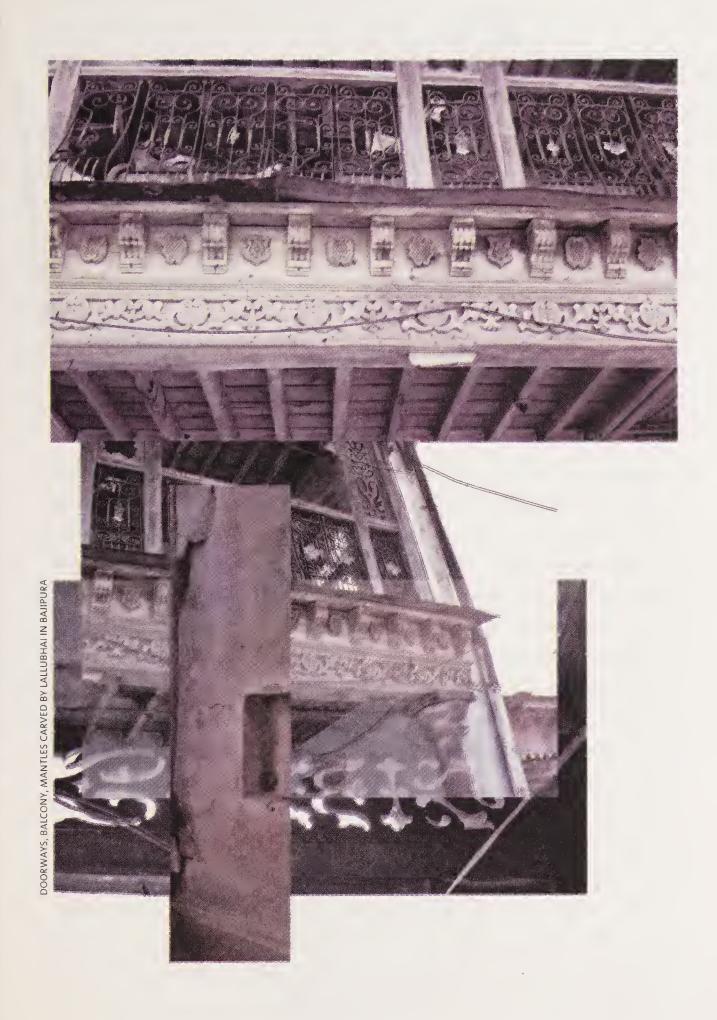
Great change was about. Our country was free and a new dawn of freedom was spreading across it. She was, as though, waking up from deep slumber. "The woods are lovely dark and deep; but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep", sang the new Prime Minister after Robert Frost. He urged his people to follow him as he plunged deep into nation building. Roads had to be built, schools and hospitals, courts, public offices, bridges, steel plants, railway tracks, engines, coaches, medical and engineering colleges.





Those who were around during the fifties and the sixties talk of the gumption filled momentum that this spirited nation building flung across the land. Vikram Sarabhai spoke of a Rocket station in Trivandrum. In Bombay, Homi Bhaba spoke about a Fundamental Research Centre. The Indian Institute of Technology was conceived and set up. In Ahmedabad, Gira and her brother Gautam Sarabhai imagined a design school.

Far away in Vyara, Lallubhai took up his challenge too. There was much to be done at Vyara. He hired masons, carpenters and painters. Besides furniture for new schools and hospitals, Lallubhai took up painting of road signs and milestones for the brand new miles of road that were being laid. Ramanlal remembers the house where they lived in those days as modest, airy and neat, but it had no doors. Strange because Lallubhai was known for the ornate doors he made for his clients. Doors and windows that still adorn havelis, witness to the years that has gone by.





Kashiben had seven buffaloes and two acres of land. She cultivated rice and jowar. She woke up at five to feed her buffaloes and cook for a household that grew by the day. There were the growing children, Lallubhai's apprentices, his masons, carpenters and painters and relatives who often came to stay. Then she would rush to the fields with food for the farm workers. She would return again twice before sundown. Then, finally, once again to sleep exhausted. The children back from the school would run errands all day. Ramanlal and his elder brother, Ambalal, did most of the running - to the farm and then to the town, several times. Lallubhai would walk in and out of the house with his tools and then without them. His workers came in to pick up tools and then to return them. Then the buffalo calf came looking for something to eat. Perhaps, this constant traffic at the door way was the reason that Lallubhai sided with the poor hinges and thought better of a door to his house.

And then on a blinding summer afternoon in 1949, Satanand Painter made his appearance through this absent door. He came from a village near Aurangabad in Maharashtra. He was a painter, always in white kurta and dhoti, frail and intense, wearing a now

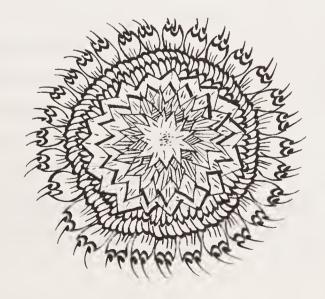
common Gandhi topee. He wore wire-rimmed spectacles over his eyes in the mould of the milder romantics. He was looking for



work and found it in painting road signs and milestones for Lallubhai. For Ramanlal and his elder brother Ambalal, his entry marked the beginning of a profound influence.

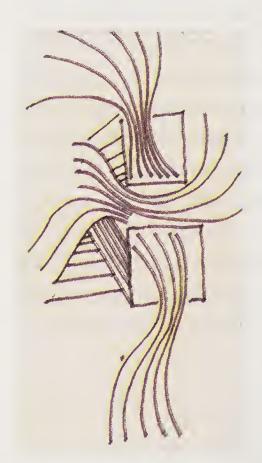
Satanand Painter was basically hired for painting milestones. He was extremely good at portraits and paintings

Ganeshas out of clay and wood. His early wanderings took him to Bombay where he worked in film studios. Ramanlal today remembers in snatches what he spoke of Anarkali, Saleem and Jalaludin Akbar and how their grand palaces in plaster, wood and glass seemed far more real than those real ones built of red sandstone at Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. Ten years later when Ramanlal was at Navsari town to appear for his SSC exams he went to Rupam Cinema to see the great Mughale Aazam. Magic danced about in front of his



eyes. He raced back to Vyara and told Satanand Painter of every frame he saw.

Ramanlal was born on the first of January 1943 at Vyara in his father's house. Two of his elder brothers died due to child-hood illness before his birth. An elder sister had also succumbed to fever. His elder brother of a few years, Ambalal, was his friend and hero to whom he clung on to like a monkey. Their early childhood went by among their mother's buffalo calves; fellow carpenters of their father, an amazing game called *gilli danda* and the remarkable Satanand Painter.



Satanand Painter used to make his own brushes. He would get horsehair, squirrel hair and with cane would fashion his paintbrush. Mixing his powders in linseed oil, he would make his colours. To Ambalal and Ramanlal, this was pure magic and they were drawn to Satanand Painter like moths to a lamp. Satanand told them tales of artists that he knew of and Ramanlal noted that the artists he spoke of were all penniless and poor like him. He loaned them his brushes and paint urging them to draw like him but was forceful in telling the young brothers not to take up art as a career lest they end up like him, penniless and poor.

Ramanlal was in class two, when he painted a portrait of a local politician after a photograph he found in the newspaper at school. The teachers at the school were so amazed at the work that one of them



went tearing down to warn Lallubhai of Ramanlal's artistic future.

Lallubhai felt fine with the artistic future of his seventh son but was infact worried about his education. Ramanlal showed no interest in studies but was always playing gilli danda wherever he could find a twig, which was anywhere and anytime. He managed



to fail in class two a second time and showed a disturbing promise to fail in class three, thrice and in the fourth class, four times and so on and so forth unless a drastic change was introduced. So, that very night when the buffaloes outside had finished sighing, Lallubhai announced his decision to send Ramanlal to the neighbouring village of Farodh, where Kashiben's brother lived.

Under the sharp eyes of his mama, Ramanlal threw away

his silly twigs and sat down to study. In a single year he appeared in the exams for class two and class three simultaneously and passed out with a first rank. He spent two more years at the small school



at Farodh where he won the awe of his friends in his studies and drawing abilities. Even today some of these friends exhibit an aspect of pride, whenever they remember the small Ramanlal. Years later in 1982, with the news of Ramanlal winning the National Award for the best animation film Director reached them, this proud angular aspect of their necks got accentuated. In 2003 July, when this photograph was taken it was a mild 30 degrees.

Ramanlal returned to Vyara and joined the same school and continued his education. He was average in his studies thereafter, but he excelled in drawing and painting. Satanand Painter and the



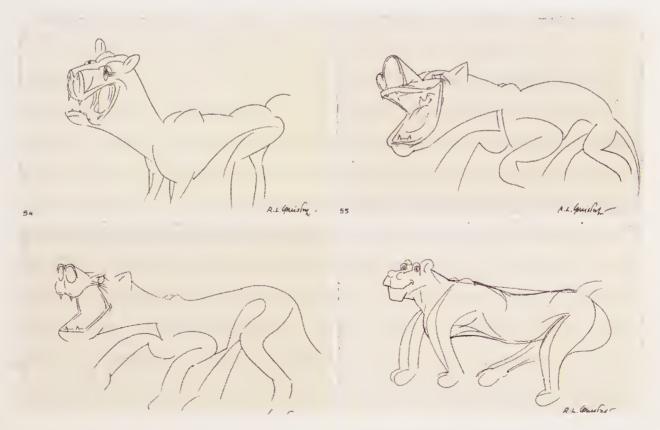






drawing teachers of his school saw the growing artist and did all they could to find him calendars and picture books to copy, besides getting colours and making brushes for him. Unlike beginners who struggle with tempera and watercolours, Ramanlal began his art with oil, thanks to Satanand Painter. In doing so, Ramanlal killed the peculiar fear of white surfaces that plague artists everywhere in the world, right at the beginning of his art. So the bizarre mathematics of 24 drawings to a second had no jolt to perform on him when he stood listening to the great Gokhale, later in his life. He only saw the magic of the bird and the empty cage fusing to become a single image of a bird in the cage when he twirled his first thuamotrope toy. He did not flinch when Ishu Patel told him to re register all 770 drawings of his film "Perspectives" to shoot under the Oxberry camera. Ramanlal, driven by a wild enthusiasm had drawn all his frames without the punched registration on his A4s. He went back to his light table and redrew the animation on punched paper.

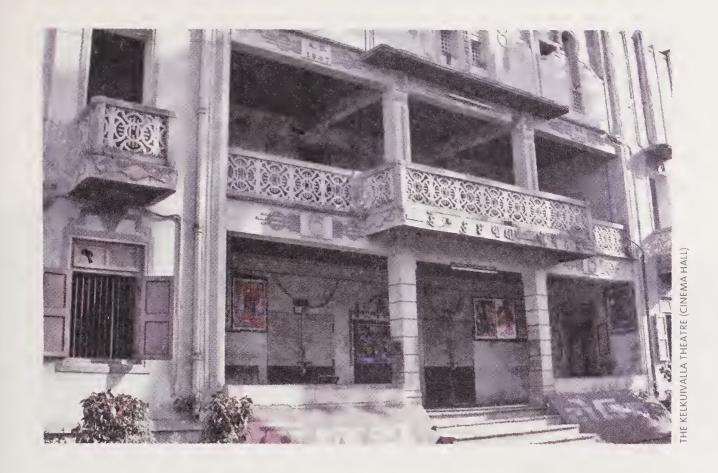
Satanand Painter taught the young brothers the art of painting signs and letters from the alphabet. He took them with him on slow road sign painting trips across the countryside along the new roads. They became his able assistants. Soon they would become faster than him in painting of signs. Ramanlal remembers how Satanand Painter would labour over a small signboard while they would race ahead on their cycle to the next milestone seven furlongs away. Of how they would come upon strange and curious sights along the lonely roads. The step wells they climbed down to drink and the shades they sat down to eat under. Ambalal learned many things from Satanand Painter. He was now much faster than the older man in the painting of signs. Among the things that he picked up from him was of the existence of the still camera. Soon Ambalal made efforts to acquire one. On these trips he was never without a Kodak 120 camera that he had borrowed from a photographer in the village. Later he bought it from him for a princely 25



rupees. When he grew up, Ambalal opened a photography studio in Vyara and was known across Gujarat as a good photographer.

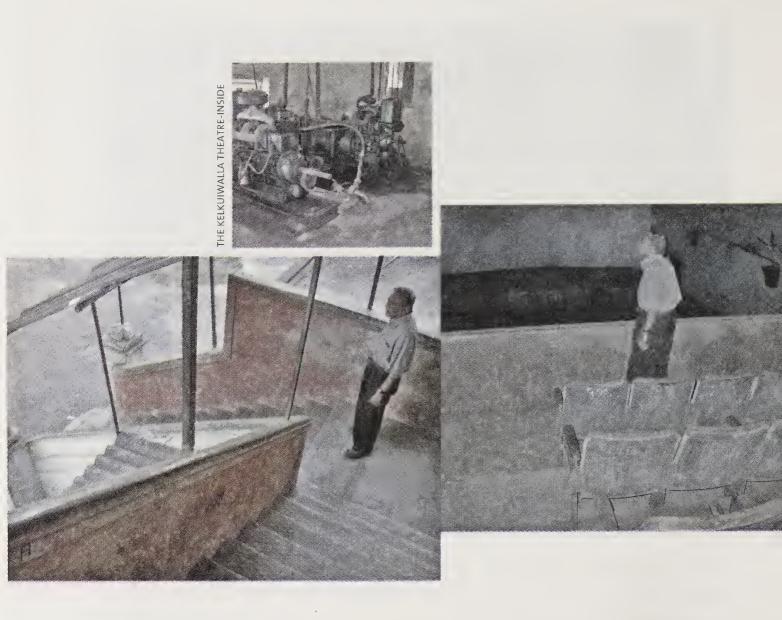
One of the most amazing experiences that Ramanlal shared with his elder brother and his camera was the day of the wild berries they had consumed before sitting down to paint another road sign a mile down from where Satanand was toiling over his. Soon after they finished painting the sign, the berries along with the step well water sprang a rebellion inside Ambalal's stomach and he wanted to go into the bushes. He chose one a little away from the road bordering a small thicket. As he sat down he chanced to look up and saw a lion glancing at him from across the ravine beyond the thicket. Without losing a moment he raced back to a surprised Raman Lal, grabbed the camera from around his neck and rushed back to the thicket and shot the vanishing cat. Had this photograph survived the adolescence of the brothers, it would have proved beyond doubt that the Asiatic Lion did roam the whole of western India not too long ago before he gave up and went away to his small village near Junagad.

Vyara had a cinema hall by 1947. Kelkuivalla Theatre: It ran full house from the very early days when they screened English movies and then the first Indian ones. Ramanlal remembers his father going with his friends to the theatre to watch English pictures when he was very young. When Ramanlal grew up, he saw "Mother India", "Sahib Bibi aur Gulam", "Kaagaz ke phool", "Mr. and Mrs. 55", "Guide", "Waqt", "Pakeeza", "Jhanak Jhanak Paayal Baje" among many films on religious subjects and also the stunning "Do Bhiga Zameen" which rang another religion in his young mind. His film, "Dinpratidin 3" done at The National Institute of Design, for the Adult Education Initiative of the Government, is surely the "Do Bhiga Zameen" of Indian Animation.



Kelkuivalla Theatre is only a small walk away from Ramanlal's school and he and his friends used to watch every new movie that came to town on the first day. So much so that the staff at the hall knew them by their names and were like friends. Ramanlal remembers most of his friends from those days. One of them is Yusufbhai who stood at the door to punch tickets but who behaved as though be owned the theatre and as though it was he who got films from far away Bombay to Vyara. Another of his classmates is Mithabhai, who married his sweetheart of class three. Then there is Kantibhai who stuck to signboard painting since the days of Satanand Painter.

On the 22nd of July 2003, accompanied by this student of his, Ramanlal went to the rundown building that was once the jewel of Vyara built in the manner of the last of the Empire stylists. Flanked by two very old Royal Palms, the building still stood, disfigured by misguided reconstructions done by successive managements. They went inside, climbed the stairs after befriending the new caretaker. The hall inside and the projection room was a sad picture of decay.



The caretaker told them of the new owner's plan of breaking down the structure soon and building a shopping mall in its place. That the two new theatre complexes that had come up next door a decade ago had finished off the great Kelkuivalla Theatre. They asked him if he could find some old photograph of the building in the old office room of the theatre. Just to look at the old glory of one of the first of the permanent structure theatres of western India. The caretaker said that there was none. At this point an old rag of a man stood up from the floor of the dead diesel generator room and rushed inside. He returned and thrust a crinkled old photograph at them. Beside the royal palms in front of the magnificent frontage of the theatre stood young Yusufbhai in full black and white. Like he stood by the

door of the hall punching the tickets long ago, letting in Ramanlal and his friends.

Ramanlal exclaimed "Yusufbhai!" and the old rag of a man with sunken eyes said "Ramanbhai."







Ramanbhai, more stories in Baroda

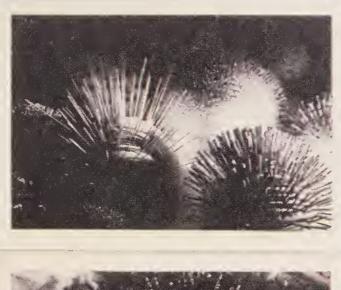
mbalal had a friend in Baroda. Amarsinh Chowdhari who was doing his BA at MS University. The same Amarsinh Chowdhari who would later become the Chief Minister of Gujarat. It was he who told Ambalal about M S University being the right place where Ramanlal must go after school. Ambalal was clear that Raman should go to Baroda



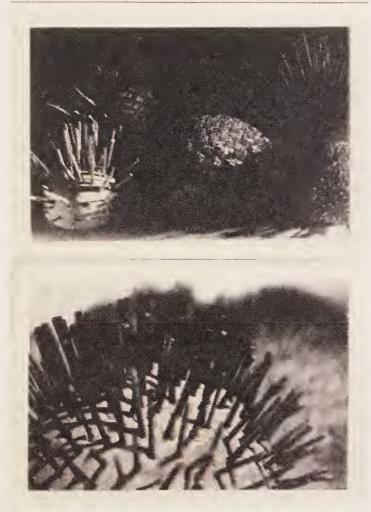


and study fine arts. Satanand Painter was totally against it. He did not want Ramanlal to be another painter of signs. Meanwhile Ramanlal had failed in Gujarati Language for his SSC exam and had to wait for another year to appear again for the exams. Lallubhai was surprised at how anyone can manage to fail in one's own mother tongue. He had great marks in mathematics though, which prompted G K Mistry, a cousin who had just finished his engineering at the MSU to present Ramanlal with a compass set urging him to go to Baroda and study engineering.

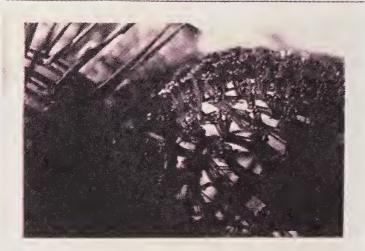
A year later Ramanlal wore new clothes and set out on a train for the first time in his life to Baroda. He stood in a line of young people, clutching a roll of his paintings and his SSC mark sheet at the Fine Arts Faculty of Baroda. In front of him was a thin dark boy wearing pajamas. He was trying to get his hair to behave when Ramanlal went up to him to ask him if he was from Vyara as well. The pajamas were a sure give away for a villager and the dark boy turned around and said that he was from another village called Bhuhari. His name was Naranbhai Patel and he had the most alarming grin that Ramanlal had ever seen.

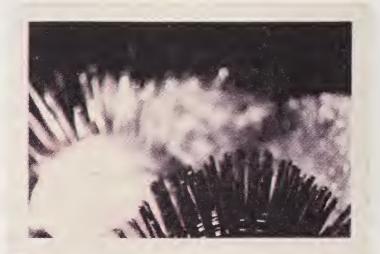








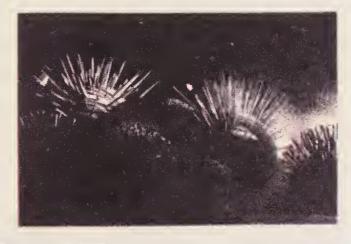


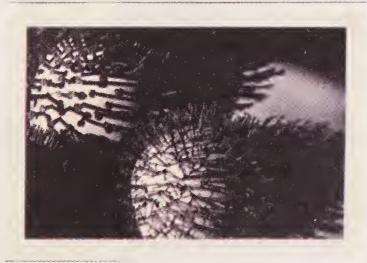




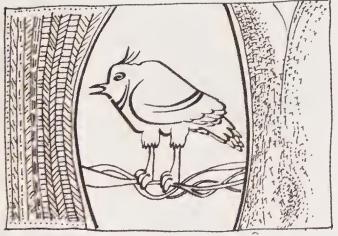












They soon became friends and after admissions found themselves in the same class. Baroda was nice and exciting for the newcomers. Large studios with skylights, lecture halls, students from all over the country and teachers who moved about on bicycles. Just when Ramanlal was getting used to the wide screen grin of Naranbhai, another young man who barely smiled made friends with them. At the widest, his smile measured about three centimeters. Mahendra Patel was two years their senior and wanted to teach them sketching from the very first day of the admissions. Without smiling he told them that he was also in charge of the canteen at The Ramji Mandir Hostel for Men. So Naranbhai Patel became Mahendra Patel's roommate and Ramanbhai found another roommate in Navin Patel.

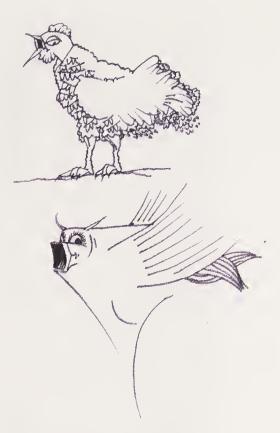


On the first day of their class Ramanbhai and Naranbhai peeped through the partition at the next classroom where a nude study was in progress. Shame filled them up completely. Sweating and shivering, they rushed back to their desks to tackle the tame still life that Ramesh Pandya had arranged for them. A structured academic study of art faced the boy from Vyara.



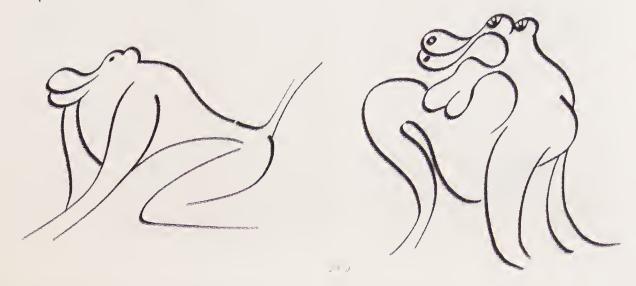
Nature study, still life, anatomy, head study, nude study, composition, history of art and aesthetics taught by some of the best teachers of the world.

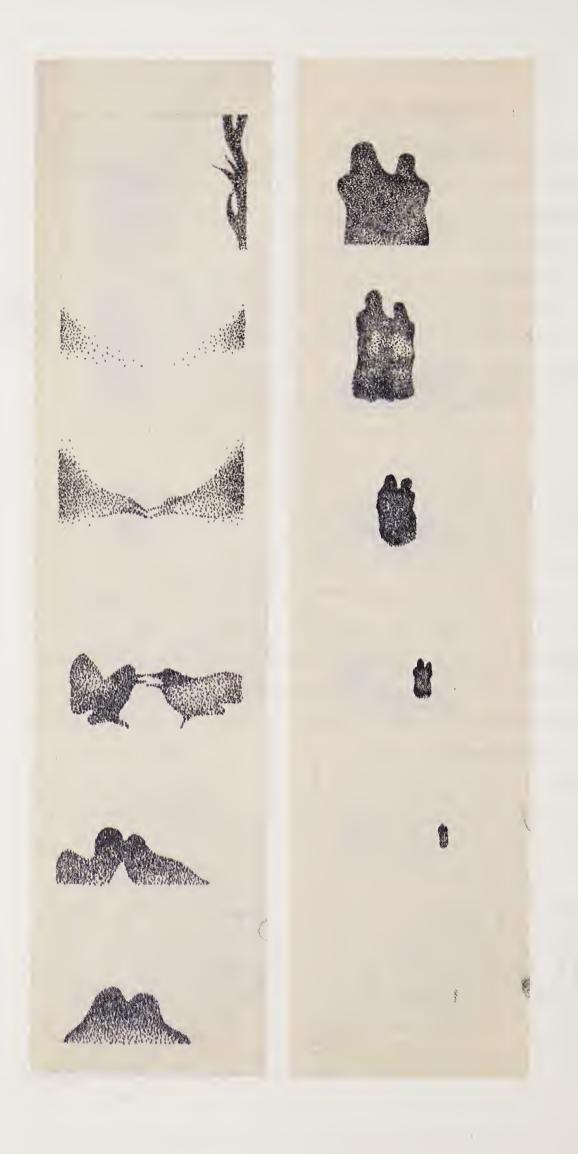
Ramanbhai was doing BA in Painting. This meant that he had to learn English and Hindi along with Art History and Indian Aesthetics. And for him English was like a stone wall, steep and tall to climb. A new friend came to his rescue. Kirit Pandya was from Africa and knew



everything backwards. He introduced him to the libraries and the movie halls in town that showed English movies. Ramanbhai loved Jerry Lewis films. He loved to watch Bob Hope. He learned to laugh watching Laurel and Hardy and to care with Chaplin. It was around then that the first of his revelations about grammar happened. That everything that happened in the past must be written in past tense. But when it is in visuals or moving images, it must be shown and seen in present tense. As though it was now and here and not then and there. Complicated.

Kirit Pandya told Ramanbhai to watch as many French and German films so that he could read aloud the subtitles as they fleeted

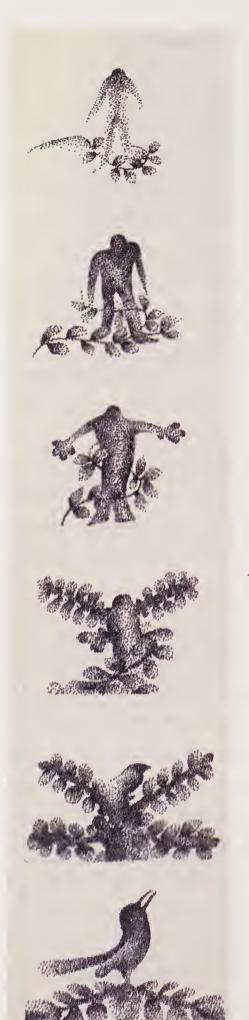






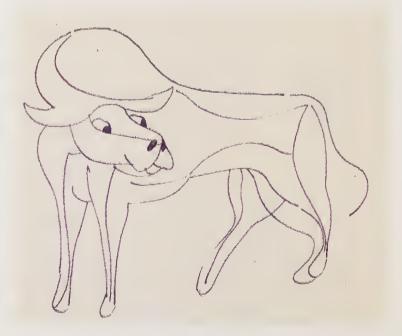
by. This was a new kind of learning, Kirit said. So when Ramanbhai and Naranbhai went to the movies the others did not. With so many creative and sometimes eccentric people around, Baroda was a place to find very unusual experiences. But to have subtitles read, most often wrongly, by two distinct voices in the dark could be harrowing especially during Alain Delon thrillers that anyway went nowhere.

However, stern looks and sharp words with startling meanings arrested their self-study afternoons when classics from European and world cinema were screened. The two then shut up and concentrated on the visuals. Ramanbhai understood that the frames themselves spoke a language that was ready to pounce on those who looked for it. The trauma of the Max Von Sydov's "Knight in Seventh Seal" reached out to the youth from Vyara in full measure. So did the Steps of "Riga". So did the little girl in "La Strada". The Apu Trilogy infused a new concern for the life of the ordinary and simple. "Meghe Dhaka Tara" and "Subarnarekha" filled Ramanbhai with a tightness of the throat that he called



upon later when he set out to make films himself and when he guided his students battling their own demons. Ramanbhai became one of the first members of the film society 'Tarang' at Baroda. Tarang like other film societies across the country was in the forefront of the parallel cinema movement in the country. But Ramanbhai also watched all of Homi Wadia films and fell in love with Nadia the hunterwali.

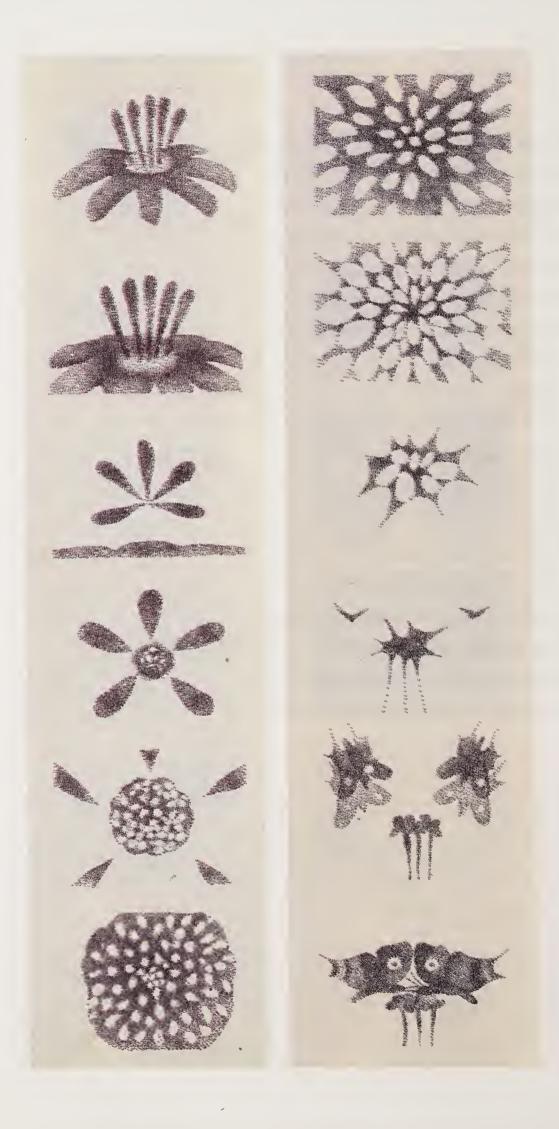
Through these films Ramanbhai understood that people across the world were the same, that there was a world outside, filled with people with similar joys and sorrows like him. Simple people, drenched in the struggles of their lives, thrown about in its troughs and swells. People who sang the same songs and drew the same drawings.

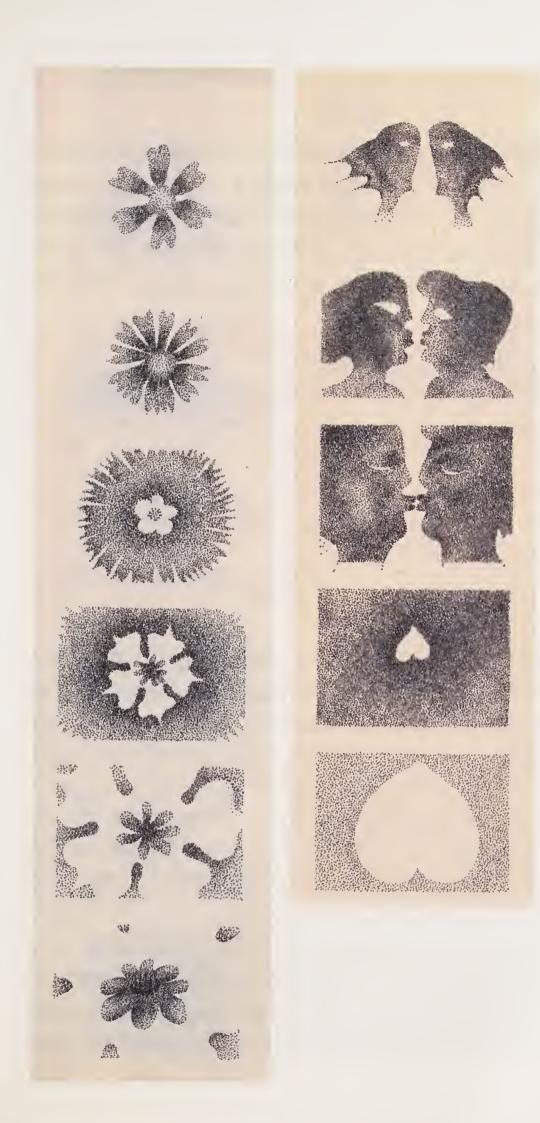


K G Subrmaniam clearly understood the background Ramanbhai came from. There were days when Ramanbhai and Naranbhai got lost in the city and returned late for class. He would then say "Bidi fook ke aagaya?" flash a mock angry glare and then look through their drawings very appreciatively. If there were corrections that he wanted to make to their drawings he would first seek permission from them before making small drawings to demonstrate. It was always "May I draw here... May I use this colour?" for this great man. When Ramanbhai's English had to be helped K G Subramaniam Sir would do it even in the midst of his fantastic lectures. It was a joy to see him work: Ramanbhai remembers the kind









of furious sketching he did before he began his murals and paintings. There were many alternatives before his final compositions. His interest on the traditional was evident in all that he did. Murals, Paintings, Textiles and the fantastic storybooks he made. He saw Ramanbhai's drawings early and asked him to look at drawings



by Giacometti. Soon Ramanbhai was rushing from Hansa Mehta Library to the studios at the faculty and back. For the first time in his life he was looking at books with plates of masterpieces. For the first time in his life he was looking at different styles and art movements. For the first time he was getting to know of the artists who have changed the way we see things. His drawings did have the volume of a sculptor's drawing. Somewhat similar in form like Giacometti's sketches done during the war. His admiration for Mani Sir, as K G Subramaniam is fondly called, grew day by day.

One day Mani Sir spoke of the Mughal miniatures. How they were different from the Kangra and the Pahadi. How Akbari miniatures were different than the other Mughals. Ramanbhai learned that Akbar disliked marble and used only sandstone when he built his forts and cities. How he insisted that he be drawn like the common folk, similar in their proportions and without a halo. So in the charged atmosphere of the early sixties in Baroda, through beedi smoke, samosas and chais, Mohammed Jalaludin Akbar became a Marxist.

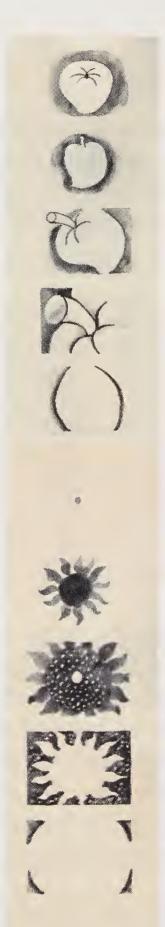


Ramanbhai slowly realised that he had ventured into an unusual world of giants. Where K G Subramaniam, N S Bendre, Shankho Chowdary, Jeram Patel, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Bhupen Kakkar and others were living their most vibrant of years.

Sometimes he wished his brother Ambalal and Satanand Painter were around too. Especially after with great difficulty he had read "Dear Theo" and "Lust for life". For through letters from his village he pieced together what was happening in the life of Satanand Painter.

There was less and less work for him and he was in deep poverty. Lallubhai and Ambalal tried to help him but Satanand Painter had to sell his plot of land and house and move to a small rented shack. He sold it to a person who promptly pulled down the





old house where Ramanbhai and Ambalal had their initiation into art. He not only made a new house for himself but also invested well in business and is today a very rich corporate.

Once long before all this, Satanand Painter had told the young brothers of a strange dream he had had. That he was one of those very great European Painters who died penniless and being dead, when he dug a hole to bury himself, he dug up seven pots of gold and silver from his small plot of land and so instead of dying completely he came back to live the rest of his life like a very rich man. Many years later, Ambalal spoke about that strange dream again when he and his younger brother met at Satanand's funeral.

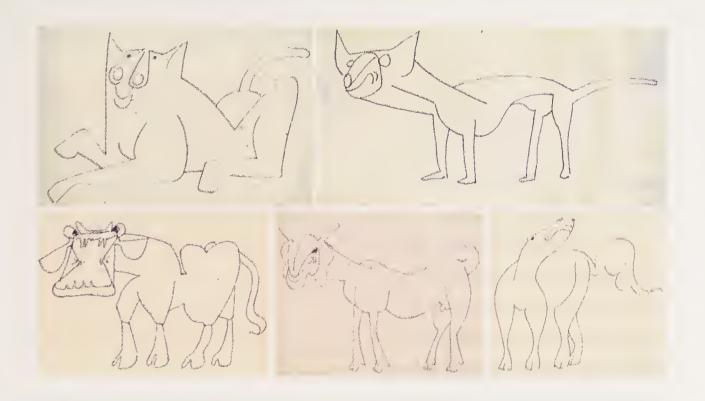
Satanand Painter fell ill and died leaving behind his wife and daughter. Ambalal and Ramanlal helped the family to come out of their sad stories.



The daughter married and is now settled near Bhavnagar. The mother lives with her. Of all the people who matter in the life of Ramanlal Mistry, Satanand Painter made the boldest of strokes.

Ramanbhai had some relearning to do. Accustomed to oils from a young age it was difficult to begin to explore in other techniques and media. Vinod Shah introduced him to watercolour. "There is no place for impatient bold strokes here," the teacher told his students. All was calm and subtle. Long ago when Ramanbhai was a boy of six a donkey had tried to teach him the same thing. He was with his friends by the river when they chanced upon a donkey staring at a cloud. So, as it is with six-year-old boys, a longing to ride the donkey Struck Ramanbhai. To gallop across the fields like a King in a hurry. So Ramanbhai sat on the donkey and urged him to





gallop. But the donkey would only communicate with the cloud. So Ramanbhai asked his friend Fakirbhai to kick its backside. Fakirbhai kicked. For the next two minutes the donkey flew across the field throwing Ramanbhai up in the air and then catching him with his spiny back, again and again and again, until a hedge came in the way and Raman Bhai flew off. Besides discovering the existence of pain sensitive areas in his anatomy Ramanbhai learned the first lessons of restraint. Watercolour was like this, no impatient strokes here.

Then there was a buffalo in Farodh that wanted to teach him something else but forgot what it was, on its way. Suddenly it charged at the ten year old Ramanbhai and threw him out of its way. Ramanbhai started bawling as he fell into a ditch. Taking that as a cue, the buffalo went back to grazing. Ramanbhai was reminded of this incident in later years, over and over again, very clearly, like in a recurring dream.

Back in Baroda, Vishnu Kumar Bhatt waved his hands about, teaching them Art History. The Gandharas, the Guptas, the Pandyas, the Cholas, Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta, Sanchi, Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, the miniatures, the folk styles and many more ways of seeing. A perspective formed inside the young minds. A perspective of the reasons for being Indian.

Perspectives always interested Ramanbhai. He was amazed at the way the railroad vanished to a single point in the horizon. As



a little boy he would stand by the station at Vyara and look both ways and get worried. Now when he traveled by bus he would sit by the driver staring at the road widening up to take the bus as it sped towards a single point in the horizon. He watched with great interest how light fell on trees, on milestones and how shadows moved across them. How the leaves moved in the breeze and how their shadows followed.



Ranjit Gaekwad was a very engaging teacher who would sit by the wayside with his easel and canvas painting trees and their shadows. He would paint and if he did not like what he painted he would paint over the same canvas again. For breakfast he had an apple and for lunch, another one.

He would sit down with his students and draw along helping each one of them with light and shadows. He would also spring up and



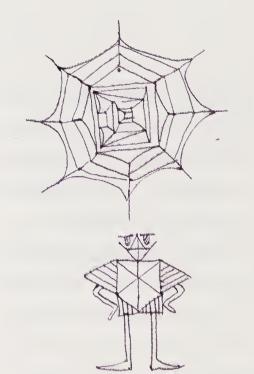
salute latecomers to his class putting them to shame and other miseries. Ramanbhai remembers him as an artist who painted and painted over his old canvases and later had very few to hang in his

palace. Ranjit Singh Gaekwad was the Prince of Baroda who studied Painting in Royal College of Art, London. To Ramanbhai, he was one of his most admired teachers.

Ramanbhai liked Chinese Art but couldn't understand or remember the names of the Artists. They either sounded the same or looked the same. Adding to the difficulties was their teacher, Mr. Chakraborty who would pronounce the names with such a very profound Bengali accent that it was not difficult to imagine China as

a small hilsa-eating province in West Bengal. Mr. Sharma the Hindi teacher, suspected that Mr. Chakraborty imagined India, his Lucknow included, being inside West Bengal as well. He was from the Faculty of Languages and could never figure out why nude study was important to young art students. Sweating, he would blush



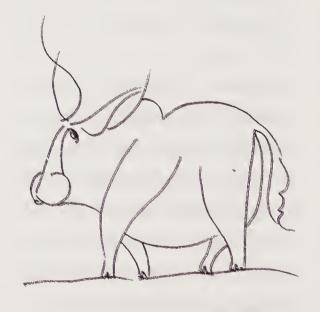


and look away when his students deliberately pulled out their nude studies while looking for their Hindi Exercise books. To Ramanbhai, life as a student in Baroda was like being in an *undiyu*. One met all kinds of people there, all cooked by art in one way or the other, sometimes topsyturvy.

Around this time Maganbhai who was a peon at the Printmaking depart-

ment began to draw. Inspired by Mani Sir and the others he began to make lithographs of monkeys who visited the campus every year. Mani Sir spoke of a Postman who turned painter and print maker in

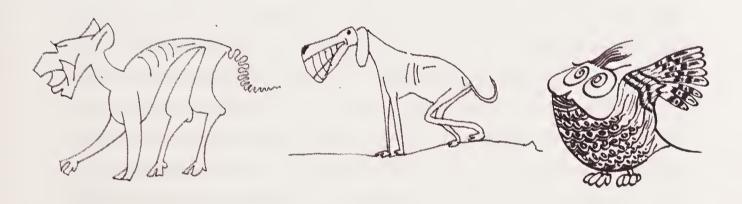
Europe. Mulk Raj Anand came and spoke on Art and History quoting Aanand Coomaraswami and Stella Kramrisch. N S Bendre Sir urged the timid students to speak out and to get out of their mild ways and live a fuller life. The mood and atmosphere in the campus was electric. One day N S Bendre Sir told a very silent shy Ramanbhai to open his mouth and talk or at least to



light up a beedi to break the dullness he was spreading around. So Ramanbhai opened his mouth and also lit up a beedi and all dullness left like magic.

Meanwhile back in Vyara, those who asked Lallubhai about his seventh son confronted an answer as vague as the Chinese names pronounced by Mr. Chakraborty. What will he become? They asked. A Doctor? An Engineer? What? He told them that his son would become a modern artist and do modern art. To questions that followed this, Lallubhai looked at a point far away in the horizon and stroked his buffaloes. To him and Kashiben, Ramanlal's liberation from his silly twigs was by itself redemption.

Ambalal was getting to be famous as a painter of portraits and signs. He met and became friends with Sanjeev Kumar in Surat a long time before he became the matinee idol that he became. Through him he visited Bollywood and met his hero Dev Anand. Dev Anand must have been taken aback to come face to face with someone who had an uncanny resemblance to him and who spoke exactly like him. With the same lunatic shiver of the neck. By then he may have seen many who had this strange infection of the shivering neck and his brand of lopsidedness, like for instance, Rajesh



Khanna. But this Shri Ambalal from Vyara took most of the cake. He took most of the cake in Vyara too, walking about at an odd angle, delivering celluloid dialogues where a normal conversation was more than enough.

Mani Sir must have liked Ramanbhai and Naranbhai because of their naïve raw sensibilities. He would leave behind the



keys to his house with Raman Bhai whenever he and his family went out of town. Ramanbhai, Naranbhai and their friends would then spend their nights at Mani Sir's house. On one such night, Naranbhai returned from Ahmedabad and found himself alone in the house. Around 2 am he heard sounds of someone walking from the bathroom to the kitchen. Naranbhai got up, put on the lights and called out asking who it was. The answer was a hideous scream. Naranbhai had enough; he quietly locked up the house and walked away into the night towards his mama's house. On the way he came across a dead man by the road lying in a pool of blood. He had stab wounds all over. Blood was bubbling out of the wounds. Naranbhai ran screaming, realising with finality that this man's scream was the scream he had heard inside the house. Since then Naranbhai became an authority on ghosts, evil spirits, witches and other relatives.

The most enduring and favourite of his stories was that of a young Patel who fell in love with a beautiful woman. She was of such physical beauty that birds fluttered around her at all times. The lost Patel proposed to her a day after he met her at the fair. She agreed under two conditions. That he should not ask of her whereabouts and that he should never be angry with her. To both, our Patel agreed and promised to adhere to, as he announced his unconditional love to her. They married and lived a life of great love for the next three years and would have continued forever, but for a visit the couple made with their child to the fair again. There, Patel saw with burning eyes that men of all ages were gaping and gaping and gaping at his wife who looked more beautiful than before. While Patel had become fat and bald, his wife was still a flower in full bloom. When they returned Patel sat down at the doorway and demanded water. His wife was inside putting the young child to sleep and she asked Patel to wait. But Patel was angry and he snarled for water again. From inside his wife agreed and her hand came out, went past the courtyard, took a turn near our Patel on its way to the kitchen, from where it picked up a lota, traveled back to the courtyard dipped it in the tank, took another turn and came to our Patel, offering him water, all by itself, stretched like silly latex. In the few minutes of delirium that Patel lived through before he went, he told this tale to his brother who obviously never believed it. The brother, who never asked any questions in his life or was ever angry, took the poor beautiful woman and child back to his village where they now live as his family.

Ramanbhai and his friends were amused by these tales and proposed to Naranbhai to make films. He did this some years later and his film "Sonal Garasi" is a brilliant look into the narrative of

the pan Indian folk tradition and one of the most beautiful films in the NID archives. A week after the night of the screams and the murdered man by the roadside, Ramanbhai was taking an afternoon nap in the same house. He woke up to the sounds of someone walking towards the kitchen from the bathroom. Ramanbhai went to the large bathroom and then slowly to the kitchen. There was no one about. Not asking aloud who it was, lest someone screamed his scream, Ramanbhai withdrew. There was great laughter when Ramanbhai narrated this to his friends. Ramanbhai laughed the most. Two days later when he visited the bathroom, somebody slapped him twice from behind. He turned around to find no one.

For many years Mani Sir lived in the same house. He never confronted the spirit who walked about from bathroom to kitchen. After him, in the early eighties, Jeram Patel moved in, when he became Dean of Fine Arts Faculty. He never met the walker either. He had some students staying in his home when he went away on tours as well. One of them who spent days and nights alone in that house later became a student of Ramanbhai. Neither did this student ever see the one who walked from the bathroom to the kitchen. Except for the musty colonial air, water that tasted of old books, creaking fans, tall ceilings and some old photographs that showed Jerambhai, Sheikhbhai and Bhupen Kakkar as young rebels, there was nothing alarming about the house at all.

When he was a schoolboy in 1958, Ramanbhai had gone to New Delhi on a tour with his class. There they met the first Prime Minister at his house. He asked them if they had enough rain in Vyara. He was struck by the simple nature of that question. Years later while at Banasthali in rainless Rajasthan where he had gone to paint a mural along with Naranbhai and Kirit Pandya, Raman-

bhai felt a searing deep hurt when he heard on radio on that fateful day that Jawaharlal Nehru had passed away. He says that a rain of tears fell on the ground then, all over the country. The mural painters fasted for two days.

Nehru's temples of modern India were still being built. In Ahmedabad the brother and sister had started moving about, acquiring land and drawing plans. They found Dashrath Patel in Paris. They found Kumar Vyas in London. They drew up a list of important names as consultants to their dream. They convened inside Le Corbusier's new Museum. A course in experimental Architecture was in place and a clutch of young architects arrived and set up shop across the road on the banks of the river Sabarmati.

Ramanbhai first heard of the National Institute of Design in 1962 from Naranbhai, who heard it from his friend Sanjay Nayak who is a cousin of Kumar Vyas. In July 1965 Giraben looked with great interest at the work of a painting graduate from M S University of Baroda who had applied for the PGP course in Graphic Design at NID. He had flunked in the mandatory IQ test and his name was R L Mistry.







R L Mistry, New Stories with Light Tables



n 1886 the Lumiere Brothers Cinematographe unveiled six soundless short films at Bombay's Watson's Hotel. From the mild toys of early animators had sprung the new language of cinema. Emile Reynaud was still operating his devise "Praxinoscope" in Paris between 1892 and 1900. Joseph Plateau's "Phentakistoscope" or "Zeotrope" was around since the 1830s. They preceded Edison, Blackton and Brothers Lumiere by years. So it is not surprising that the father of Indian cinema made his first film using the technique of animation. Years before "Raja Harishchandra" and the birth of Indian cinema, at the outset of the 20th century, Dadasaheb Phalke made a film using matchsticks and a stop motion camera. It was made around

"DIN PRATIDIN 3" STILL





the time when Kashiben went to see her first train in Timberwah. He made another one five years later in 1917, again using stop motion time lapse photography. It is called "Birth of a Pea Plant."

Arthur C Clarke says that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. After making "Birth of a Pea Plant" Dadasaheb Phalke remarked: "I was well up in all the arts and crafts that go toward making a motion picture—drawing, painting, architecture, photography, drama, magic— I was fully convinced that it can be done!" The first animation film to be released in theatres was the second Indian animation film, made and released twenty years later in 1937 by New Theatre Ltd of Bombay and it was called "The Pea Brothers". Gunamoy Banerjee directed this film. And what is "pea" to Indian Animation? May this question plague students of Indian cinema for some time.

The Cartoon Film Unit was set up in Bombay as early as 1945. Between 1931 and the outbreak of the Second World War, many films were made. Production only declined during the war due

STORYBOARD - "DIN PRATIDIN 3"

to scarcity of raw film. The first Prime Minister had by then flung himself into building a new India. Along with him the other greats also threw in their weight. In 1948 the great dance Maestro Uday Shankar made "Kalpana". The music was by Vishnudas Shirali. This experimental live action film is of great importance to Indian Cinema. Choreographed to music, the images used movement synchronised to rhythm and melody. To pioneering animators and filmmakers this film was a major influence in more than many ways. Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen saw this film more than ten times each.

Kashiben's seventh son was being taught restraint by a donkey when the next two Indian animation films, "Jumbo the fox" of Ranjit Movietone and "Michke Potash" directed by Bhataram Mitra, of New Theatres, were released in April 1951. Like how the seventh son understood the basics of life, these two films are important lessons learned and understood by those who wrote the later history of Animation in India.

In 1956 J.S Bhownagary directed "Radha and Krishna", a twenty-two minute animation film. Music was by Vishnudas Shirali. K B Godbole, H R Doreswamy, V Murthy and P Bharadwaj photographed

the animation. The commentary was by Zul Vellani. "Radha and Krishna" won many international awards for Films Division of India

who produced it. The Silver Bear at Berlin International Film Festival, Best Film award from Santiago Festival of Experimental Films, mentions from Japan, Canada and Australia came to this infant unit of cartoons, as recognition to Indian form and content. This international



acclaim inspired new animators like Kantilal Rathod, Pramod Pati, G K Godbole and V G Samant along with Ram Mohan, Bhimsain, and Suresh Nayak to join The Films Division.

In 1957 Clair Weeks, an animator from Disney Studio was invited to Bombay to train the fledgling cartoon department of Films Division. Most of our master animators were trained during



this period. Ram Mohan, Bhimsain, Satam, Erza Mir, and Pramod Pati. However, the animation film "Banyan Deer" that was released in 1959 lacked Indian sensibilities. It was done in a strange mix of Ajanta Fresco and

Disney style. Surely some introspection did happen due to this sadness and serious thought began to fall on Indian art styles.

Sergie Eisenstien met Walt Disney and became friends. Eisentstien was enamoured by the great man and his new art. Yet to

STORY DISCUSSIONS WITH CLAIR WEEKS





students of cinema, Soviet animation has very little to do with the Disney style. In Eastern Europe, during the war and after it, animation grew as an expression of the artists against fascism. It had no space for the "cute" in it. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki the Japanese borrowed the art of animation from Disney but rejected his style. A small shy man, Renzo Kinoshita, stood guard and wrenched Japanese style free. There are other countries in Asia that Disney style intervened in after the war. The Philippines. They took his art and style to their heart. They ran the

biggest of Animation Studios for decades and one finds Filipinos at the helm of animation production studios all across the world, overseeing the work with great clinical precision. Yet today, they stand empty handed and sad as though generations of their own art had been stolen from them. Certain that future generations will blame them for this loss; they are beginning to hang their heads.

We had milder Renzo Kinoshitas in our land then, perhaps many, and R L Mistry salutes them all. For he says that without them we would have gone the Filipino way, selling our arts and crafts to Hanna Barbera and co. This thought is special now as it is again the time for our Kinoshitas to wrench free a style and content of our own, before share markets, sweat shops and other over enthusiastic

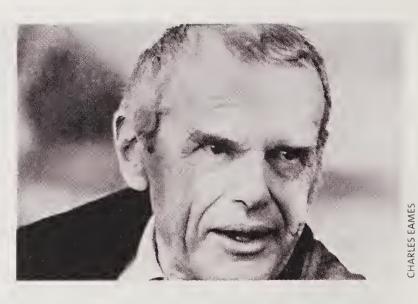


sharks can fashion a dull future for our arts. We will not let this happen if only we walk about our landscapes more, gathering our stories and understanding their layouts.

R L Mistry urges his students to meet a tall man with huge ears in Bombay. He says that even looking at him is education. One of the original talents in animation that our country produced, Ram Mohan is still at the helm; almost single handedly leading the Indian animation industry. He also walks about the land to far flung villages teaching animation. In 1970 when he was doing the Doordarshan animation, R L Mistry visited Ram Mohan many times. Each visit taught him new things. The successful bi-pack shoot that he attempted on the Rostrum for the colour version of the Doordarshan symbol was the result of these visits.

"Whose Reality?" is one of the best animation films made in the country. Made by Vaibhav Kumaresh in 1999 as his diploma film at the NID, and R L Mistry as his guide, it is a sample of simple understanding of our layouts. There are scores of other films in the NID archives that exhibit this hugging of our landscapes and people. Films that explore the varied styles and narrative traditions of our land.

At the outset, Films Division, the being a Government arm, had instituted a method of exhibition of the newsreels and their documentaries along



with the feature film screening at the movie halls. Some of our best documentaries and short films were made and appreciated by our people during this Government sponsored initiative.

Clair Weeks was a great teacher. He is responsible for the discipline that was infused into Indian animation. So that the first groups of animators like Ram Mohan, Bhimsain, Satam, Erza Mir, and Pramod Pati could inculcate the beginnings of production values for studios in the country. The truth that it was the Disney school that first articulated the basic principles of animation into animation filmmaking cannot be disputed. Based on Newtonian physics and the work of Muybridge this articulation was made by the scores



of animators through years of hard work. But the design of the frame and the characters are always the prerogative of the maker. This is the truth that prevails and like in live action cinema, the truth that differentiates one film from another. One filmmaker's work from the

other. Films from one country to the films from another. This is the truth that makes Renato Berta, the master cinematographer of Euro-



pean cinema to chant, "a frame is a frame is a frame is a..."

In Ahmedabad the dream of the Sarabhais had taken shape. It meshed with the report Charles and Ray Eames made for the first Prime Minister, into a formidable grid.

Committed to the ingenuity of the lota. Committed to design, as a vehicle to social change. Completely and thoroughly committed to the people of this country. Consultants began to come in. They walked into the superstructure of a revolutionary modern ship. And they knew where it was poised to sail. This was not a third world



building. This was far more avant-garde than their own new houses. They would not attempt to teach what they taught in their lands, but would formulate another curriculum. For within the spaces that the domes held, they saw the drawing of a new philosophy. The clutch of young architects by the river had fashioned the best piece of experimental architecture to be seen in modern India. Gautambhai sat down to write a manifesto. Dashrat Patel was put in charge of it. A garden was designed around. The National Institute of Design as we know it now, came to be.





R L Mistry had fancied that he had figured out English very well by the time he passed out of the Fine Arts Faculty of Baroda. But the mandatory IQ test at NID foxed him and he surprised himself by flunking in it. Luckily, through his bad spellings and wrong readings of questions, Giraben saw promise. Inside a railway coach at Bharuch Station on his sad way back to Vyara, P M Dalwadi rushed in to tell R L Mistry that Giraben had called him back to join. He joined the PGP course in Graphics, Communication Design in 1966. The building was still partially under construction. Temporary cabins were being made for the seniors. The classes were on the first floor

to be shifted to the second after six months. Naranbhai had already joined. And soon after R L Mistry, Pradeep Choksi, Girish Patel, Ramesh Parmar, S M Shah, V H Varia, Chandravadan Shah, Navin Patel and Paresh Chatterjee joined. They were the second batch of students taken. Of the first batch that included Vikas Satwalekar, Ishu Patel, P M Dalwadi, I S Mathur, Mahendra Patel and Manubhai Gajjar, only Manubhai and P M Dalwadi were around when the second batch arrived. The others were training in Basle, Switzerland. They would come back to teach them the following year.



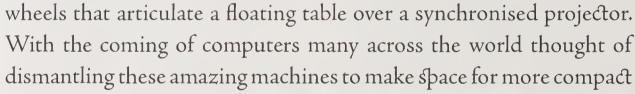
KASHIBEN, LALLUBHAI AND FAMILY

After discovering that some of us could draw and paint on the walls of the caves we lived in, a spate of inventions and concepts followed, devising new instruments that altered and sculpted civilisation. In the realm of devises like the telescope, the camera obscura, the letterpress, the magic lantern, the steam engine, the Porsche and the Harley Davidson is the Rostrum Camera. One came as a gift from the Ford Foundation and sat in a newly constructed building with a sunken floor near the gate when R L Mistry joined. Machines are sometimes known to inflict new religions upon those who touch them. This Oxberry Rostrum Camera did just that. It inspired Ishu

Patel to take the road that made him the best animation filmmaker that our country can boast of. It inspired I S Mathur and Vikas Satwalekar to think of an Animation Department at the Institute. It inspired R L Mistry, Naranbhai, P M Dalwadi and hundreds of

others to experiment in pure cinema.

The Rostrum is from the lineage of the first animation devises. The toys that harkened in the language and dynamics of cinema. It stands on two legs and from its hip hangs a Nelson and Hordel stop motion camera. It has cogwheels, cams and gear



and advanced workstations. But they stopped themselves because they were alarmed at the thought that their over enthusiastic actions would not be very different from that of those foolish people who exchanged their copper ware for silly plastic buckets.

STUDENT AT THE WORKSHOP



YAS AT THE WOR

All highly advanced animation software of today is structured on the Rostrum system. For the simple reason that this machine translated the language of cinema from drawings to moving images through its precise mechanical articulations. That this machine was designed to devise close ups, mid shots, long shots, pans, dissolves and fades that constructed the grammar of our visual language. That one could walk in with thousands of individual drawings and come out



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with a can of film with a cinema inside it. Ub Iwerks had made a multi plane Rostrum two floors high to shoot the Disney classics like "Peter Pan", "Snow White" and "Fantasia". The creators of new



R L MISTRY AND VARIA AT THE GRAPHIC DESIGN STUDIO

animation software fall over each other to align their packages as close to the Rostrum as is possible because there is no other process of making a 2 D animation film but through the system that the Rostrum describes.

The famous Illustrator Leo Leoni and Animation Camera expert Giovanni came to NID invited as

consultants by Dashrath Patel in 1965. They made "Swimmy", the first film at NID, to demonstrate the Oxberry Rostrum. For Ishu Patel, Vikas, I S Mathur, P M Dalwadi, Manu Gajjar and Mahendra Patel, of the first batch of students, this film was the beginning of new ways. Beautifully crafted, it speaks a simple tale from under the sea. Of the underdog who prevails. Symbolic in many ways, this film seems to have begun a movement whose traces still colour contemporary Indian animation. "Swimmy" was also the first cut out animation film made in India.

RL Mistry's first teacher at NID was Mr. Biesele, the Graphic Design teacher from Switzerland. Huge, over six feet tall Mr. Biesele was a very simple man. For the six months that he was at the Institute he gave the students a very intensive initiation into Graphic Design. How to hold the pencil became an issue, drawing straight lines was another. For painting graduates given to expressionist lines, filling sheets and sheets of pencil strokes was not easy to grapple with in the beginning. But when the huge warm man sat along with them demonstrating the assignments he gave, learning happened. They designed posters, made illustrations and for the first time used the Oxberry to shoot their 3D models on film. Then Bruno Pfaffli came for a shorter term to teach typography. R L Mistry remembered Satanand painter, sitting by the roadside, teaching him and his brother how to draw and paint legible lettering for signboards and milestones. But here at NID, type design was as though a Vedic science practiced with reverence. Some presence was steering the new students by their shoulders and turning them towards another direction from the road that they set out to travel from Baroda.

It was a joy to see his old friend again. When he returned from Basle, Mahendrabhai had not improved his smile but had evolved



into a monk whose faith was typography. And to make up for the small smiles Vikas shook everyone with his big laughs. R L Mistry attributes his growth from a painter to a graphic designer and as an animation filmmaker to the learning he did under Vikas Satwalekar, Mahendra Patel, I S Mathur, Ishu Patel and P M Dalwadi and to the consultants who were invited to the new Institute in quick succession. Like he felt in Baroda not many years ago, R L Mistry realised that he was in the company of remarkable people once again.

One after the other consultants arrived augmenting the culture of cross-disciplinary design learning at NID. Charles Eames, Bob Gill, David Tudor, G K Gokhale, Ram Mohan, Saul Bass, Peter Nielson to mention a few. Each visit and workshop exposed the new students to radical thought. Urged on relentlessly by Giraben and Gautambhai, the Institute was growing. All under its roof were a typography studio and printing press with fantastic Heidelberg machines, a photography studio, a state-of-the-art wood and metal workshop, a textile studio. The fabulous library and next to it, the Gallery of Modern Design Classics. To R L Mistry, over all this loomed the tall Oxberry Rostrum.

And beside it lived Ishu Patel fired by the madness familiar to animators. If he was not locked up inside with the Rostrum, animating sand, torn cloth and paper, stones and beads, he was walking around stealing glances at the photography sink. And when Dalwadi was not looking he would have a quick dip in the sink to think up his bead game.

R L Mistry first heard of other mad men, particularly the one called Maclaren in Canada through Ishu Patel. He watched "The Chairy Tale", "The Neighbours", "Blinkety Blank", "Perspectrum" and "Pas de deux". Stung by all this R L Mistry thought back to the vanishing railway lines of Vyara station and the little boy who looked up and down bewildered. He grabbed paper and pencil and began to animate. He made about 700 hundred drawings and took it to Ishu Patel at the Rostrum to shoot. Ishu shot a gawky finger that waved at him saying, "You have not punched your paper! Go and punch your paper!" There was a boom of a laugh then, which was most probably Vikas passing by, and R L Mistry turned on his heels and returned to his light table to punch and redraw those frightful number of drawings again. This is R L Mistry's first film. It's called "Two Point Perspectives."

To learn something in life you must always "swallow your pride" or "grab your pride", Ishu Patel used to tell R L Mistry. When it was certain that Ishu would leave the Institute for the National Film Board of Canada, R L Mistry hung his head low and said to himself that this would end the fate of animation in NID. The buffalo from Farodh came charging and threatened to knock down the little boy aside again.

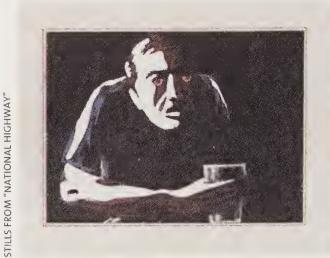
Then a huge man came in, asked for some simple machine tools and dismantled the huge Rostrum in front of his eyes. Before the next daybreak he had overhauled it, drilled the metal frame for the mirror and set the optics and put it all back again- all by himself. This was Peter Nielson, the inventor of the Oxberry Rostrum Camera. To see this machine of pure cinema dismantled and put back to the last bolt of the optics can blitzkrieg anyone to action. R L Mistry started to make storyboards for his next films.

G K Gokhale had by then retired from the Films Division as chief animator. I S Mathur invited him to come to NID to train R L Mistry, Naranbhai and the new student Moinudin. This was their first experience in classical drawing animation. He taught them



how to make working storyboards, to make key drawings, to plan shots and articulate the table for pans. In his younger days Gokhale had seen a few Disney films that had fired his young mind and he learned the craft completely, by trial and error. Later when Clair Weeks

came to train the Films Division animators, Gokhale had risen up to a senior level. He was invited to make films at the National Film Board of Canada. At NID he was planning his new film "The King and the Mouse" for which he asked R L Mistry to shoot line tests. This was greater learning because R L Mistry came to understand the mathematics involved in the camera and table movement calculations of the Rostrum. This study helped him greatly when he designed and shot the animation of the Doordarshan Symbol in 1970. Guided by Vikas, this was one of the first client projects in animation at NID. This was also the first time that the symbol of Doordarshan was animated and telecast.





R L Mistry had meanwhile completed his course and joined as faculty in 1970. He married Bhartiben the same year to to whom he was engaged since 1968. In 1972 they had a son, Deepu. A second son, Lalu died of brain hemorrhage 18 months after he was born in 1974. Right from his preschool days Deepu began to draw. Today,



he is an animator employed in USA. R L Mistry's daughter, Jayjayvanti born in 1979 is married and is settled in Canada. Lallubhai Dhanjibhai Mistry died in 1980. Ambalal passed away in 1989. Kashiben passed away in 2003, a few weeks after this photograph was taken. R L

Mistry goes to visit his brothers at Vyara often, and sometimes to Farodh to look for the meaning of the buffalo, who threw him out of its way very long ago.

Clair Weeks came to India again, this time invited as an UNDP consultant to run a special training programme in animation at NID. Six new students were taken from The Fine Arts Faculty of Baroda and Sir JJ School of Art, Bombay. Though R L Mistry assisted Clair Weeks in the training, he was himself learning from



the master, Clair Weeks spoke at length of the history of Disney Studio of how systematic methods were evolved and adopted to train and set up studios. However unlike the previous training that Clair Weeks did at the Films Division in 1957, he was in an Institute that housed other disciplines of Design as well. Perhaps the reason why Animation filmmaking at NID evolved differently from a typical Disney school in style was the presence of the philosophy within our domes. Or was it also because of people like Ishu Patel, R L Mistry and Naranbhai who were our first people who grappled with the Rostrum at the gate, had roots deep in rural ethos of our country? The teaching method of Clair Weeks became clearly the foundation to develop a regular course in animation later in 1985.

In 1983 an animation teacher from West Surrey College of Art by the name of Roger Noake came to NID. R L Mistry thinks that his informal yet systematic ways of teaching focusing on the contemporary scholarships made concept development for films far more engaging than picking up folk tales and making them Disney-like in style. He made the students dig deep into their own backgrounds looking for styles and narratives to model their animations.

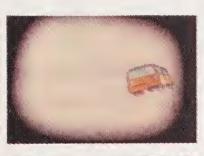
He showed them animation films made in other countries that had identities of their own. He told his students to look into their own lives for stories and experiences that could be films waiting to be made. Unlike live cinema an animator conceived and constructed a world with its own physical laws for his actors to act. He told them that Disney had made a world with believable physical laws for his actors to perform and had indeed become a God in doing so. He urged each one of them to play God. Roger Noake was one of the animators who made the classic cult film "Yellow Submarine" on the Beatles in the 70s. After Ishu Patel and his awe-inspiring repertoire from across the seas, R L Mistry believes that it is the ramblings of this man that has given a story to the animators of NID. To be original in content was to be truly global.

R L Mistry then became aware of the peculiar science of animation that made the maker a captive of the making. A cauldron that took in sensitivity, sensibility, line, colour, art, texture, literature, cinema, politics, history, landscape, culture, mathematics, physics, intelligence, philosophy, sound, music, personality, character, concern, love and animation. Suddenly this filmmaking was not just fun alone, but a very responsible venture, bordering on alchemy.

R L Mistry had always loved roads. He was traveling by bus to Vyara on every weekend he could spare. He would take the night bus and would seat himself beside the driver to look at the road as it rushed at them. He liked to watch the lights that fell on the road thrown by street lamps and the oncoming vehicles. Familiar road signs and milestones that made him remember Satanand and Ambalal. He also saw terrible accidents on the way, very common sights on Indian roads. Horrible and unfortunate examples of drunken driving. Charged by Roger Noake's presence in the campus

and encouraged by I S Mathur, he made a storyboard of harsh images flashed and lit up by moving lights. Like a point of view through the windshield of a speeding Ashok Leyland bus. In 2004, between two cities in Germany, a group of young animators stuck a sequence of animated drawings on the walls of the tube. Commuters inside the train looked out through the windows and were delighted to see an animation movie instead of the drab dull grey wall they were used to. The animation stopped when the train stopped and ran when the train moved. Some commuters even forgot to get off at their stations. Today, this is named as one of the best examples of *avant-garde* installations in New Media. In 1984 when "National Highway" was made, RL Mistry was not very far from this new way of seeing.

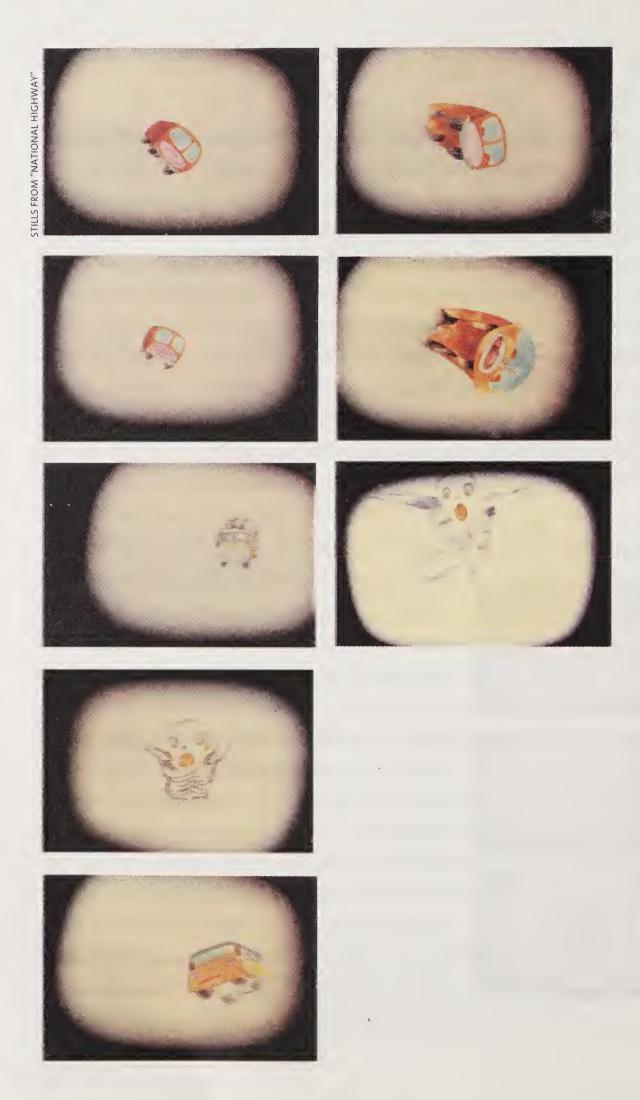
I S Mathur took "National Highway" and entered it for competition at the National Film Festival in New Delhi. When he







returned to NID with the news that the film had won a national award, he sped as fast as his generous frame could allow to R L Mistry to tell him that the applause after the screening exceeded the length of the film. The award proved that the country was ready for experimental animation that reflected the contemporary sensibilities of our country. Here was recognition to the identity of our animation cinema. Like "Radha and Krishna" of the late 50's, "National Highway" was set to kick start a new journey. Shortly thereafter, films by the new students Binita Desai and Nina Sabnani brought more recognition. Confidant, I S Mathur initiated the regular





animation programme in 1985. From the day the Rostrum came to NID, I S Mathur had always shown encouragement to animation. When he left NID in late 90s it was only to invite Russian Masters like Vladimir Tarasov to train two hundred animators in Hyderabad. I S Mathur, Nina Sabnani, Binita Desai and R L Mistry conceived the new department of animation at NID.

Till he retired and afterwards as a visiting faculty, R L Mistry remains the mainstay of the animation basics taught here. He has been drawing all his life. He would find any excuse to sit down and make small sketchpads out of folded paper to fill them with small drawings of animals, buildings, clouds, birds and humans walking about. When he teaches, his preoccupation is drawing, the line, its grammar and is only concerned with the lines that emote, act and perform. Soft spoken, he gives all personality to his lines and himself withdraws paces behind it. Perhaps to make way for the young. Perhaps to dodge that charging buffalo. His stoicness about

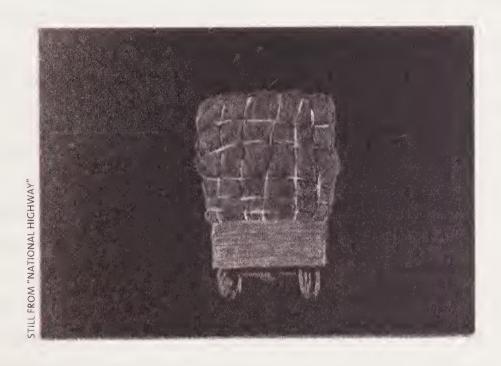
layouts pushed his students to look into their own backgrounds, to draw out styles and narratives of the regions they represented. So that from the farm of our styles and narratives, an identity will step out to stake definite claim in the arena that Disney and Magna rule.

A year before he was to retire, R L Mistry went overseas, for the first time in his life, to Canada to sign agreements with animation schools there. He came back with wide open eyes telling this student that had we exhibited our animation films to our common folk from the very beginning, we would have had a larger audience with aesthetics to match. They would have demanded for more and we would have complied. Through it we could have engineered a new economics.

If only we take a look at our philosophy inside the domes again. If only we walk about our landscapes like Bapu told us to. To respect, study and experience the layout of our land and then to construct our *mise en scène*. So that we do not have to translate our content to western sensibilities. So that we do not have to sell our talent to sweatshops. Like how our cinema etched an existence outside the clutches of Hollywood, Indian animation would then nurture an identity and battle out its existence. Phalke, Ray, Ghatak and our other masters studied and mastered the new technique and used it only to tell our own tales. Cinema was invented in the west but our cinema is our cinema.

From the imprints of the "hiran chaap" at Chotaudaipur and from the dabblings on the Marayoor dolmens, our art grew, never paying abeyance to the rivers that swung close. Neither did it fossilise when it reached it's several successive climaxes. Our Art is alive. This book is a gallery of drawings from the many storyboards and ideas R L Mistry sketched for films that he made and proposed to

make. They strongly reflect the contemporary Art of India. As signs for our new generations to pick up from, this is the message of R L Mistry.





Chrowledgements

This book would not have become a reality but for the generosity and support of a large number of people. I am thankful to each and every one of them. Foremost is *Dr. Darlie Koshy* who agreed to the concept of a book on R L Mistry readily and gave me encouragement at all levels while gently pushing me towards its completion.

To R L Mistry, for his patience with me, first when he was teaching me animation, nineteen years ago, and to my constant diggings of the last two years. To his wife Bharatiben, for endless chais, fabulous food and remarkable stories. And for showing me the beauty of performing the resilient support to the artist. To Sudarshan Khanna for urging me on. For helping me with everything I wanted, and adding perspectives when I was losing them. I am thankful to Nina Sabnani for teaching me where to look for stories. For showing me how to sift through the times and work of those who shaped the history of animation filmmaking. To Dashrath Patel for inspiration and telling me to go on. To M P Ranjan, who told me of the spirit du temps, of the beginnings at NID. To Errol Pires for blasting me for

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To Rajorshi Ghosh for teaching me that designing of a book is as engaging to the mind as the construction of a cinema. I thank his design for lifting this book up.

Two years ago I saw *Sanjeevbhai* and *Deepakbhai* of Animation studio scanning in hundreds of drawings by R L Mistry to preserve on CDs. They wanted to gift them to R L Mistry when he retired. I am grateful to them for inspiring me to think of a book.

Prakash Moorthy



About the Author

After his Bachelors in Fine Arts from Trivandrum, Prakash Moorthy did Masters in Fine Arts from MSU in Baroda. He finished his post graduate diploma in Animation film Design from National Institute of Design in 1989.

He has numerous Animation films to his credit: He is a well known production designer for cinema and visiting faculty at various institutions in India including the alma mater, NID. He contributes to short story collections of Penguin India, and has traveled extensively and worked at places including Zurich, Bern, Basle and Lucerne. He was invited to the Hiroshima International Animation Film Festival in 1998. He is Project Director "Unsung Among Us", a digital cinema initiative of the UNDP.

Prakash Moorthy lives in Trivandrum.

